

## Matthew 7:7-12 “God Isn’t Santa Clause”

Briony and I typically take the last week of December off for one of our vacation weeks, so the week before Christmas we have to kind of scramble to get two weeks’ worth of work done in four days including the *Caller*, two weeks of service bulletins, slides, and everything else. One of the things we have to get done at the beginning of the week is to let the newspapers know what’s on deck for the next Sunday, which means we have to be two Sundays ahead of the game the week before Christmas. So Briony sent them these sermon titles – December 25<sup>th</sup>, “Dawn of a New Light” and January 1<sup>st</sup>, “God Isn’t Santa Claus.” Well, we got a call from the *Enterprise Record* the next day. “Are you sure you have that right? Shouldn’t ‘God Isn’t Santa Claus’ be on Christmas Sunday and ‘Dawn of a New Light’ on New Year’s Day?” Nope. You read it right. “Yeah, but ... Christmas? Santa Claus? And *New Year ... New Light?*” That’s right. “Are you sure? Because once we print it ...” No, we are very sure that you have the correct titles for the correct Sundays. “Okay.”

But who knows, *you*, beloved people who are gathered here today, may be thinking, “Why did we talk about new light and new beginnings on Christmas Day and then a week *after* Christmas, when a lot of us have taken down our Christmas decorations, we’re talking about *Santa Claus?*” Well ... notice that our decorations are still up. Why? Because in the church year, we’re still in Christmas season and will be until Thursday, which is Epiphany. That’s where we get the song, “The Twelve Days of Christmas.” And guess what? Even *next* Sunday, three days *after* Epiphany, we’ll still have the decorations up because that’s when we’ll observe Epiphany Sunday. So please pardon me if it seems like I’m working backwards by talking about Santa Claus on the first day of the New Year.

Ah, okay ... so we must be talking about St. Nicholas, the 4<sup>th</sup> Century bishop of Myra. The one called, “Nicholas the Wonder Worker.” That’s where we get this whole “Santa Claus” thing anyway, right?

Because Nicholas was known for his secret gift-giving ... he'd give children fruit or something. Then 12 centuries later, the Dutch took this idea and ran with it when they started celebrating St. Nicholas Day in December. Are we on the right path here? Well, first of all ... no. That's not who we're talking about this morning. The Bishop St. Nicholas *surprised* kids with fruit that *they weren't expecting*. Kids didn't ask for it. It was by the grace of a kind man with a heart for children that they received these gifts.

Nor are we talking about the "Sinterklaas" who came along with the Dutch tradition in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. We're getting a *little* closer though. The Dutch sort of merged the Bishop St. Nicholas with Odin the Norse God, and what you got was a red-caped, white-bearded, stately old man who came to town carrying a birch branch in one hand and a bag full of chocolate in the other. The good kids got the chocolate. The not-so-good kids? They got the switch. But again ... no one *asked* Sinterklass for *any* of this. If you were a kid, you had to make a choice about whether you were even willing to go meet Sinterklaas at the town gates. Because think about this: If you did ... if you decided to go meet him at the gates, there was a risk. You had to go through a process of self-examination. You'd have to ask, "Have I been good enough to get the chocolate? Or has my less-than-charitable deeds this past year earned me a beating with the switch?" Again ... there were no petitions involved with this ritual. You *hoped* that your good deeds outweighed your bad deeds, and if so, you thanked your lucky stars that you got *anything* out of the deal that didn't leave a permanent mark.

No, this morning, I'm talking about Santa Claus. Modern-era, Western culture, red suited, sleigh riding, reindeer breeding, ho-ho-ho, come down the chimney Santa Claus that we've seen in Coca Cola ads since Coke was invented. For the most part, he operates within the naughty and nice paradigm, although the traditional smack-down with the birch rod has been replaced by a less violent, but still shaming lump of coal. You know what sets this Santa Claus apart from St. Nicholas, Bishop of Myra and the Odin-like Sinterklass? This Santa Claus takes *petitions*.

You don't have to just sit around waiting and *hoping* that Santa Claus will show you some grace and charity. You can actually contact him via US postal service, e-mail or through one of his many agents stationed at shopping malls throughout the country. And you may *specifically ask* for your heart's desire which has its ups and downs. This is beautifully illustrated in two Christmas songs – “All I Want for Christmas is My Two Front Teeth” on one extreme and “I Want a Hippopotamus for Christmas” on the other. You see where it's difficult to find a happy medium sometimes? Here's the deal though. If you get what you asked for, then clearly you're on Santa's “nice” list. If you don't? You must have done something wrong.

Now can you see where I'm going with this sermon? Some people think this is the way God operates! Bring your petitions to God, and if God grants what you ask, you can consider yourself in God's good favor. If not? Well, you didn't pray hard enough. Or ... maybe you have some hidden sin in your life that you're trying to hide. You better not pout, you better not cry, right? God becomes the functional equivalent of Santa Claus. So how do people come to this conclusion?

Let's consider our text this morning. Right in the middle of the sermon on the mount ... the greatest collection of Jesus' teachings you will *ever* find ... considered gospel truth by Christians and admired by many different philosophies and faith traditions all over the world, Jesus says: **“Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!”** And believe me, this isn't the only passage of scripture in the Bible that lends credibility to this idea that God is the great wish-granter in the sky. So is it any wonder why most of the prayers we offer God are prayers of petition?

Are we trying to get God to change God's mind? Because that seems strange, especially if we believe that every decision God makes is made in light of all the facts. Because if that's true, there can be *no* information that God *fails* to take into account that might cause God to revise God's plans or decision. Therefore? Therefore God should never change God's mind, and we should just quit with the prayers of petition. Okay ... and here comes the question that showed up in my Big God Question Box – "If we don't believe that God is a Santa Claus then who or what is God?" I told you I had some good stuff in that box.

I've been working on this one too. It's been in the box since October. I've wrestled with it. I've got pages of notes beefed up with all sorts of quips and quotes from classic theologians. Shoot, I even had a line or two in there from Garth Brooks' song, "Thank God for Unanswered Prayer." But let me tell you from my personal experience what happened this week that tied this up for me. Let me share with you the answer to the prayer I lift up every week – "God, may it be that I find the words for the good news I may share with my congregation." Sounds a little like a petition though, right?

The words of good news came while I was doing yard work. That's when I listen to my weekly podcasts. Christa Tippet's "On Being" was playing, and her guest was Eugene Peterson who is probably best known for his paraphrase of the Bible called "The Message." He was on the show talking about the very thing we're talking about this morning. How's that for a "God moment?" Here's the first words 13 words of the podcast: "Prayers are tools not for doing or getting, but for *being* and *becoming*."

My prayer after hearing that? "Thank you God that I chose to listen to Christa Tippet this week." Not, "Thank you God for possessing me and moving my hand to press *On Being* instead of *TED Talk Radio*." Because as usual, right when I think I've come up with the best way to articulate something, something else is revealed. Moving away from seeing God as Santa Claus involves changing the way we communicate

with God. And prayer is how we communicate. Peterson says that when we pray without listening *first*, we pray out of context. The listening part of is what gets neglected most. When we start out with petitions, we fail to listen. But if we *start out* listening, we can hear God speak and God can take us along paths we never thought we'd go with our prayers. Peterson also says that when we *do* pray in petitions, sometimes *our* answers are *our prayers*. Sounds weird, I know. The ability to make the transfer from asking to listening is really profound. But when you start to do it, it's so liberating.

So let's look at our text again through the lens of Peterson's interpretation. This is from *The Message*: **Don't bargain with God. Be direct. Ask for what you need. This isn't a cat-and-mouse, hide-and-seek game we're in. If your child asks for bread, do you trick him with sawdust? If he asks for fish, do you scare him with a live snake on his plate? As bad as you are, you wouldn't think of such a thing. You're at least decent to your own children. So don't you think the God who conceived you in love will be even better? Here is a simple, rule-of-thumb guide for behavior: Ask yourself what you want people to do for you, then grab the initiative and do it for them. Add up God's Law and Prophets and this is what you get.**

During the Advent Season, we talked a lot about desires, hopes, and dreams. Does God *care* about *our* desires, hopes, and dreams? Of course. That's made abundantly clear throughout the prophets and the gospels. Is God a wish granter? No. We don't always get what we want. Does God grieve when we are grieving? Yes. God also rejoices with us too. That's also consistent throughout the Bible. Who is God if God isn't Santa Claus? God lives in you. God lives in me. God lives in everything we can and cannot see. God knows our deepest wishes, our sincere desires, God's Spirit moves us like a wind-driven fire. All that we need to know about God and God's ways can be seen in Jesus. So let's continue our celebration of the coming of the Christ-child, by opening our ears and hearts *first* before anything comes out of our mouth.